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## THE FIRST EXPEDITION OF JEDIDIAH S. SMITH TO CALIFORNIA.

ROBERT G. CLELAND, PH. D.

Through the courtesy of the *St. Louis Republic*, a courtesy which I desire to acknowledge at this time, copies of the two letters printed below were placed at my disposal. It is hoped that the re-publication of these documents as they originally appeared in 1827 will be of material value in subsequent discussions of Smith's first venture into California territory.

FROM THE MISSOURI REPUBLICAN OF OCTOBER 11, 1827.

We have been politely favored by Gen. Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, with the perusal of a letter, written by Jedidiah S. Smith, who has been for several years engaged in hunting and trapping in the Upper Missouri, and who has visited that extensive barren country on the West, not heretofore explored.

From this letter, written in plain style, we extract the following:<sup>1</sup>

"My situation has enabled me to collect information respecting a country which has been, measurably, veiled in obscurity, and unknown to the citizens of the U. States. I allude to the country South West of the Great Salt Lake, and West of the Rocky Mountains. About the 22nd of August, 1826, I left the Great Salt Lake, accompanied by a party of fifteen men, for the purpose of exploring the country to the south west, which was then entirely unknown to me, and of which I could obtain no satisfactory information from the Indians that inhabit the country on it's north east borders. My general course on leaving the Lake, was S. W. and W., passing the Little Uta Lake, and ascending Ashley's River, which empties into it, where we found a nation of Indians, calling themselves 'Sumpatch'; who were friendly disposed towards us. After leaving the Little Uta Lake, I found no further sign of Buffalo—there were,

1. This letter has served as the basis for most of our authoritative knowledge of Smith's first expedition. It has been used by Chittenden (*The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, I, 282-7); while Bancroft (*History of California*, III, 152, note) cites several portion from a French version to which he had access. The full letter, however, is available only in the files of the "Republic."
2. "A body of Ute formerly occupying San Pete Valley and Sévier r., central Utah." They have been variously called Land Pitches, Sampeetches, Sampitches, Sampuches, etc. The legitimate name is Sanpet. See Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 30, Article under Sanpet.

however, a few of the Antelope and Mountain Sheep, and an abundance of Black Tailed Hares. Leaving Ashley's River, I passed over a range of mountains, S. E. and N. W., and struck a river, running S. W., which I named Adams River,<sup>1</sup> in compliment to our President.

"The water of this river is of a muddy cast, and somewhat brackish. The country is mountainous to the east, and on the west are detached rocky hills and sandy plains. Passing down this river, some distance, I fell in with a nation of Indians, calling themselves 'Pa Utches.' These Indians, as well as the Sumpatch, wear robes made of rabbit skins; they raise corn and pumpkins, on which they principally subsist—except a few hares, very little game of any description is to be found. About ten days march further down, the river turns to the S. E., where on the S. W. of it, there is a remarkable cave, the entrance of which is about ten or fifteen feet high, and five or six feet in width; after descending about fifteen feet, it opens into a large spacious room, with the roof, walls and floor of solid rock salt (A piece of which I send you, with some other articles which will hereafter be described). I followed Adams River two days travel further, where it empties into the Seeds Keeder,<sup>2</sup> which I crossed and went a south course down it, through a barren, rocky and mountainous country. In this river are many shoals and rapids. Further down, a valley opens, from five to fifteen miles in width. The land on the river bank is fertile and timbered. I here found another tribe of Indians, who call themselves 'Ammuchiebes.'<sup>3</sup> They cultivate the soil and raise corn, beans, pumpkins and mellons in abundance, and also a little Wheat and cotton. I was now nearly destitute of horses, and had learned what it was to do without food. I therefore concluded to remain here fifteen days, to recruit my men; and in the meantime, succeeded in changing my few remaining horses, and was enabled to purchase others, from a party of runaway Indians, who had stolen from the Spainards. I here obtained some information regarding the Spanish country—obtained two guides—recrossed the Seeds Keeder, and traveled a west course fifteen days over a country of complete barrens, and frequently travelling from morning until night without water. Crossed a salt plain eight miles wide and twenty long. On the surface of the ground is a crust of white salt, underneath is a layer of yellow sand, and beneath the sand a few inches, the salt again appears. The river Seeds Keeder, I have since learned, empties itself in to the Gulf of California, about 80<sup>4</sup> miles from the Ammuchiebes and is there called the Collorado.

1. Probably the Virgin.

2. This name for the Colorado seems to be peculiar to Smith. I have not been able to find it elsewhere.

3. The Mojaves. Variouslly called the Amuchabas, the Amajabas, etc.

4. Not far from the junction of the Colorado and Gila.

"On my arrival in the province of Upper California, I was eyed with suspicion and was compelled to appear in the presence of the Governor, residing at St. Diego, from whence, by the assistance of some American gentlemen, (and particularly Capt. W. H. Cunningham, of the ship *Courier*, from Boston,) I was enabled to obtain permission to return with my men, by the route I had come. I also obtained permission to purchase such supplies as I stood in need of. As the Gov. would not permit me to travel up the sea coast towards Bodago, I proceeded eastward of the Spanish settlement. I then turned my course N. W., keeping from 150 to 200 miles from the sea coast. I travelled three hundred miles in this direction, through a country somewhat fertile, and inhabited by a great many Indians, mostly naked, and destitute of fire arms, and who subsist upon fish, roots, acorns and grapes. These Indians, unlike, in this respect, to any others that I have seen, cut their hair to the length of three inches.

"I afterwards arrived at a river, which I named (After a tribe of Indians residing on its banks) Wim-mel-che.<sup>1</sup> I found here a few beaver and elk, deer and antelopes in abundance. I made a small hunt, and then attempted, with my party, to cross Mt. Joseph, and join my partners at the Great Salt Lake. I was disappointed in this however as I found the snow so deep on the mountain, that my horses could not travel. Five of my horses having already perished for want of food, I was compelled to return to the valley. Here leaving my party, I set out on the 20th of May, accompanied by two men, and taking with us seven horses and two mules, which were laden with hay and provisions for ourselves, and in eight days we succeeded in crossing Mount Joseph,<sup>2</sup> with the loss of only two horses and one mule. The snow on top of the mountain was from four to eight feet deep, but so solid that our horses only sunk into it from six to twelve inches.

"After traveling twenty days from the east side of Mount Joseph, I struck the S. W. corner of the Great Salt Lake. The country between the mountains and this Lake, is completely barren, and entirely destitute of game. We frequently travelled two days, without water, over sandy deserts, where no sign of vegetation was to be seen. In some of the rocky hills we found water, and occasionally small bands of Indians, who appeared the most miserable of the human race. They were entirely naked, and subsisted on grass seeds,

1. The Wimilchi, "a Yokus (Mariposan) tribe formerly living north of Kings r., Cal., opposite the Wechikhit." Variouslly called Homelches, Mow-elches, Ne-mil-ches, Was-mi-lches, We-mal-che, We-mil-che, We-molches. See Am. Bur. of Ethn., Bul. 30. The river was doubtless the Merced.
2. Unfortunately I have not been able to locate Mt. Joseph with any degree of accuracy. From the account, it would seem that Smith crossed the Sierras much farther south than is usually supposed.

grass-hoppers etc. On arriving at the Great Salt Lake, we had but one horse and one mule remaining, and they so poor, they could scarcely carry the little camp equipment we had with us. The balance of the horses we were compelled to eat as they gave out."

FROM THE MISSOURI REPUBLIC OF OCT. 25, 1827.<sup>1</sup>

*American Enterprise.*

Extract from a letter from Capt. Cunningham,<sup>2</sup> dated St. Diego, Dec. 1826:

"There has arrived at this place Capt. Jedidiah S. Smith, with a company of hunters from St. Louis on the Missouri. These hardy adventurers have been 13 months travelling their route, and have suffered numerous hardships. They have often had death staring them in the face—sometimes owing to the want of sustenance; at others to the numerous savages they have been obliged to contend with. Out of 50 horses which they started with, they brought only 18 with them, the others having died on the road from want of food and water.

"Does it not seem incredible that a party of fourteen men, depending entirely upon their rifles and traps for subsistence, will explore this vast continent and call themselves happy when they can obtain the tail of a Beaver to dine upon? Captain Smith is now on board the *Courier* and is going with me to St. Pedro to meet his men:<sup>3</sup> from thence he intends to proceed northward in quest of beaver, and to return, afterwards, to his deposits in the Rocky Mountains."

[St. Diego and St. Pedro are ports in California, W. Coast of America, near 3000 miles from Boston].

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1. This letter is merely mentioned by Chittenden. No other writer apparently has done even so much as this.
  2. Of the ship "*Courier*." He was one of the Americans at that time in San Diego harbor who went on Smith's bond of good behavior to satisfy the Mexican Governor, Echandia.
  3. Smith's itinerary after leaving San Diego has been a matter of guess work. From Cunningham's statement, he apparently came by sea to San Pedro, where he met his men, who had not accompanied him to San Diego; or else went from San Pedro to San Bernardino when his company is supposed to have camped during his absence. If the latter supposition is correct, the expedition probably reached the San Joaquin by way of the Cajon. On the other hand, if the entire company came together at San Pedro, they may have gone by the San Fernando and Tejon route.